

*I Could Tell You 'Bout My Life*, a ByKids film, directed by Michael Martin

As we have read Yaa Gyasi's novel, *Homegoing*, we have seen how enslavement in the United States evolved into incarceration. Beginning in Ghana in 1750, Gyasi ushers us forward in time, linking historical events, laws, and cultural phenomena to illustrate this progression, ultimately suggesting that the 21st century is not without slavery, but only that it now has a new name.

While Gyasi's characters and stories are fictional, their impacts on us as readers are still great. Nonetheless, hearing from a real American teenager will better solidify the reality and urgency of the issues of mass incarceration and juvenile justice.

### ***I COULD TELL YOU 'BOUT MY LIFE***

When Michael Martin got arrested at age 17, a judge sentenced him to jail time on Rikers Island, New York City's largest jail and one of the most violent in the country. In crafting *I Could Tell You 'Bout My Life*, Mike recounts events that led to his incarceration. He describes being bored, "hanging with the wrong crowd" and interviews his 64-year-old grandmother about raising five children in a single bedroom, East Harlem apartment.

As Michael narrates his journey, he raps the chorus from a song he wrote: "A couple young'uns always breaking rules, never staying true just the summer time blues ... yea I barely even know my mother, always played the block but those was my brothers, 'cause where I'm from we don't switch on each other." Since his release, Michael has taken classes at Friends of Island Academy in order to obtain a GED.

### **Featured Individuals**

- Mike Martin
- Cynthia C James - Mike's grandmother
- Pierre Reyes - Mike's parole officer
- Morjean Bellafanti - Director of Educational Programs - Friends of Island Academy
- Tim Ruffin - HSE Instructor at Friends of Island Academy
- Gina Lee - Policy and Planning Associate at Friends of Island Academy
- Deanna Gondek - Communications Coordinator at Friends of Island Academy
- Bashiri Johnson - Percussion / Production - Life in Rhythm Media
- Mike's mentor film makers (unseen, but significant):
  - Chiemi Karasawa: award-winning documentary filmmaker and founder of Isotope Films
  - Hollis Meminger: a Presidential Leadership Scholar and prolific cinematographer with television credits including *The Blacklist*, *Narcos* and *Younger*

### Discussion Questions

1. What systems and resources failed in Mike's life that contributed to his decision to commit robbery? Also, what else was going on in Mike's life that may have led him to commit robbery?
2. What mentors, resources, and opportunities contribute to Mike's ability to grow and develop after enduring incarceration?
3. What is Pierre Reyes' point in saying that the cost of a year in prison is the same as the cost of a year at an Ivy League school?
4. Mike tells us, "It's important to tell your story because everyone has a different point of view and you never know when your point of view can help the next person. It's a chance to speak about how you feel... and establish a connection." In what ways does Mike tell us his story? *How and through what means* does he speak his truth?
5. What is the significance of Deanna Gondek creating an Open Mic night at Friends of Island Academy?
6. How might Bashiri Johnson influence Mike Martin as a musician and artist, but also as a human being? How might he have a positive impact on Mike?
7. On the following page, read the applicable legislation. What questions do you have about these laws? Make observations, underline lines or words that stand out to you, and make connections to Mike Martin's story.

### Connections to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

1. How would H "Two-Shovel" respond to Mike's story?
2. Which characters would appreciate Mike's understanding of the importance of being able to tell your own story?
3. Which characters from Yaa Gyasi's story would most identify with Cynthia, Mike's grandmother?
4. In general, how did watching *I Could Tell You 'Bout My Life* impact the way you are reading and thinking about *Homegoing*?

## Applicable Legislation

- **Articles from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights**
  - **Article 4:** No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.
  - **Article 7:** All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.
  - **Article 25:**
    - Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
    - Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.
  - **Article 28:** Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.
- **The 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution:** "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."
- **Raise the Age of Criminal Responsibility:** On April 10th, 2017 New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed a law inspired by the "Raise the Age" movement and New York is now raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18 years old, no longer prosecuting and incarcerating 16- and 17-year-olds as adults.

What systems and resources failed in Mike's life that contributed to his decision to commit robbery? Also, what else was going on in Mike's life that may have led him to commit robbery?	What mentors, resources, and opportunities contribute to Mike's ability to grow and develop after enduring incarceration?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peers he chose to hang out with were a bad influence</li> <li>- Free time, boredom</li> <li>- Parents were not guardians: raised by grandmother</li> <li>- No safe space → no school yard to hang out in, police kept shutting down basketball courts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grandmother, other family (cousins?)</li> <li>- Friends of Island Academy</li> <li>- Parole Officer</li> <li>- Bashiri Johnson</li> <li>- Open Mic</li> </ul> <p>Both Johnson's mentorship and the Open Mic night provide the antithesis of the dehumanization of incarceration: Mike is encouraged to use his voice and express himself as an individual</p>

## Open Response

Answer **one or more** of the following questions:

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Criteria for Success:

- ☐ Write at least a half of a page and no more than two pages.
- ☐ Times New Roman, size 12, double spaced. Use an [MLA heading](#).
- ☐ Use first person pronouns (I, me, my).
- ☐ Be specific. Include at least **two** [quotations](#) from the film.
  - ☐ [Either integrate the quotations or use the quotation sandwich structure.](#)
- ☐ Vary your vocabulary (avoid vague language like “thing”).
- ☐ Be brilliant and interesting. This is my first impression of your writing!
- ☐ Use only your brain and your notes. No other sources may be used.
- ☐ Proofread!

List of names in the film

Mike Martin

Cynthia C James - Mike's grandmother

Pierre Reyes - Mike's parole officer

Morjean Bellafanti - director of educational programs - friends of island academy

Tim Ruffin - HSE Instructor (??)

Gina Lee - policy and planning associate

Deanna Gondek - Communications Coordinator

Bashiri Johnson - Percussion / Production - Life in Rhythm Media

Topics:

- Importance of telling stories
  - How does Mike tell his story?
- Codified / institutionalized racism → 13th amendment connection
  - How would H "Two-Shovel" respond to Mike's story?
- Social justice reform
- What systems and resources failed in Mike's life that contributed to his decision to commit robbery?
- What is his parole officer's point in saying that the cost of a year in prison is the same as the cost of a year at an Ivy League school?
- What are alternatives to incarceration?
- Mentors, resources, opportunities

Laws

- 13th amendment
- Age of incarceration in NY

Directed by Michael Martin

Arrested at age 17

19 years old

East harlem

We don't got a school yard to hang in. we only have one court

When people get bored, they find dumb stuff to do

Cynthia C James - grandmother

Became his guardian

Mother had problems

Had to go to family court

Put up a little argument

I'm taking my grandson home

I raise five grandchildren

Worked 12 hour a day

231 for clothes

This is not how you want to live your life

As soon as you turned 16, that's when you got in trouble

Macho man -- movie like skull face -- to be untouchable

I didn't care about nothing stage

Robbery -- my heart went to the floor

Court the next day

Just pray that you don't have to do time

Judge gave me \$40k bail → you have to go to rikers

Rikers Island is NYC's largest jail and one of the most violent in the country

**Juvenile detainees have been subjected to routine violence both from other inmates and correction officers**

**Mike spent five months there when he was 17 years old**

**By law, NY State no longer incarcerates youth under the age of 18 with adults at Rikers Island**

You are now enslaved. You gotta do whatever we tell you to do. Use a sprayer on humans that is supposed to be

Forget about any

No cameras -- you're a criminal they don't give a damn about you

At the end of the day, you gotta watch your own back in jail

One kid killed himself over it

When they're bored like that, that's when they're going to do dumb stuff.

I want to be known and recognized for who I am

How did I change in the last couple of years?

Bad to good boy

Understand what other people are saying

Why did you come to help me?

You help me -- I was not letting you stay in jail

Do you think incarceration is a productive way to reform youthful offenders?

There's a lot of things that go into becoming a mature individual. Being incar

What's a better solution?

Pierre Reyes - Mike's parole officer

There isn't one solution. You have to address individual factors. Firm believer in education over incarceration. Cost of one individual in jail = one year in ivy league school

Need to graduate from school

Friends of Island Academy

Provides young people involved in New York City's justice system with a network of individualized support in education, job and careers, arts and recreation and civic engagement. From custody to post-release, Friends provides a continuum of services that offer young people a sense of belonging and opportunities for achievement

Morjean Bellafanti - director of educational programs - friends of island academy

Tim Ruffin - HSE Instructor (??)

Advice (to stay out of prison?) - finish school, obtain GED

Gina Lee - policy and planning associate

Goals are small in ways. Teaching you the piano -- just little things. Those will lead to something within you

Solutions?

World without prisons. Extreme? Scary? Impossible?

Deanna Gondek - Communications Coordinator

Build resilience so that you can be leaders for the future

Open Mic nights

- Power of storytelling
- Power of having a voice
- Institutionalized racism
- Prison is the new slavery

Even if you take three steps forward and one step back, let's focus on the movement forward

Hired to paint a mural in the Bronx

Peace and unity

Build on it -- why would I do something that would mess that up?

In the next 2-3 years, want to move out, have a career, don't want to be rich, but I want to pay for my needs

Bashiri Johnson - Percussion / Production - Life in Rhythm Media

- Trying to give back
- Give opportunities to other people
- Long history of working with artists
- Everyone has a message they want to deliver

Power of being able to tell your story

- Get back to that feeling

Malcolm X: "The only way we'll get freedom for ourselves is to identify ourselves with every oppressed people in the world."

You would never think that he was in Rikers jail.

Go home, go to school, and listen to your grandmother.

What do you see in me that I may not see in myself?

Hope, love, I see everything in you. **Be you.**

GED test

Notice angle of camera -- so low!



Passed four out of five exams  
He'll retake the math  
He's going to kill it.